

The Italians *in* America

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COMMITTEE ON PUBLICATION OF THE ITALIAN MISSION
OF THE METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH
150 FIFTH AVENUE, NEW YORK

1912

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The Italians in America

THE Italian has an intense love for the land of his birth. He thinks Italy is the most beautiful country in the world, and there are many who agree with him. "Come le piace l'Italia?"—How do you like Italy?—is one of the first questions asked of an American by an Italian when he discovers that you have lived in Italy. The American asks a similar question of a visitor to this land. "How do you like our institutions?" The Englishman or German rarely asks such a question. His national pride would not so degrade itself. He thinks his country is all right, and your estimate of it is a matter of positive indifference to him. Perhaps in this attitude of the Italian may be found the secret of his unconscious affiliation with American ideas.

I. Italian Democracy

There is much in common between the Italian and the American. A rugged democ-

racy characterizes this dweller in his sunny southland. He believes in the divine rights of man, and a man-made nobility has small value in his eyes. The Englishman loves a lord, but the Italian idolizes a man of noble character whether he be aristocrat or plebeian. Victor Emanuel II., Cavour, Mazzini, Garibaldi, are names to conjure with, and while the two first-named were aristocrats by birth, the favorite cognomen of the King was "Re Gallantuomo," which indicated his bluff democratic spirit, and in diplomacy Count Cavour was the plain man of the people. A title of nobility was offered Garibaldi by a grateful king and nation, but like the great commoner, Gladstone, he chose to preserve his identity, and his name is honored more in Italy than any other earthly name. There is not a city, town, or hamlet in that fair land where the name of this great man is not perpetuated in some way or other. He is the Washington-Lincoln of Italy.

This democratic instinct has molded the life of the people, strengthened the family tie, and developed an almost patriarchal life. I remember a home in Sicily which I have often visited, in which there lived together in perfect harmony a widowed mother with four sons and their wives, two unmarried daughters, besides the smaller

children of the family,—I think there were sixteen in all. A large round dining-table accommodated more than a dozen at one sitting, and the affectionate relations were delightful. The dreadful earthquake at Messina swept away the entire family, except one. That family represented a type of Italian life beautiful to behold. Any one familiar with the life of the Italian in America will know that the same spirit characterizes them in the land of their adoption. Not only the immediate relatives are cared for, but uncles, aunts, cousins, nephews, nieces, brothers and sisters-in-law, fathers and mothers-in-law are all united under one roof. This means a generous hospitality, suggestive of our own southland. It also means a strong family affection. An Italian father may punish his child, even severely, but no father loves his children more than the Italian.

The feudal system, although abolished by law, is still practically in vogue. Most of the land is the property of large land-holders, and absentee landlordism, as in Ireland, is the curse of Italy. The Italian nobleman usually farms out his land to a "piccolo proprietario" for a certain sum, and then lives in Palermo, Naples, Rome, Florence, or some other city, on his income. The lesser landlord then sublets to the "contadino" or

peasant, and, of course, expects the lion's share of the proceeds. The peonage system, also, is in practical operation, and many a poor peasant is hopelessly in debt to his landlord.

II. Taxes

Then there are the taxes, and it is generally conceded that Italy is the most heavily taxed nation in Europe. A recent writer in a prominent review insists that the national budget is unjust. The poorer classes of Italy are burdened with fifty per cent. of the national tribute. The majority of luxuries escape taxation, while the essentials—corn, salt, petroleum, and like products—are exorbitantly taxed. The "Lotto," or national gambling association—a heritage from papal rule—nets about twenty-seven millions of lire (\$5,400,000) yearly to the state, depleting the public pocket to the extent of nearly seventy million lire (\$14,000,000), coming principally from the small wage-earner, and the laboring classes. The duties on salt benefit the Treasury from fifty-four to fifty-nine million lire, or \$10,800,000. Two hundred and twenty pounds of salt which costs the state about thirty-two cents is sold to the people for \$8.00. Petroleum which costs the government \$3.50 is sold at \$13.00.

The operative forces of the Italian struggle for national independence and constitutional liberty were essentially democratic, as we have already indicated, and the national sentiments and institutions are nominally so to-day. Yet we find not only successive governments but even the local administrations of communes and provinces following in practise a course diametrically opposite. For example, in the South, the saddle-horse and the four-in-hand of the rich aristocrat pays no tax, because, forsooth, such luxuries cost money but bring in no income. On the other hand, the donkey of the contadino or peasant, which carries his produce to market or draws his antiquated plow, being considered an implement of labor and consequently a source of income, must pay the tax. This is obviously unjust, and the effect upon the Italian laboring man, especially in the South, has been to cause him to seek other lands for a living.

The enormous emigration to America is the direct result of the deplorable economic conditions of Italy, otherwise very few would leave their fatherland. "*L'Italia e' bella ma povera*,"—Italy is beautiful but poor,—the immigrant declares with tears in his eyes, and it is easy to see that they would stay there if they could; indeed, many re-

turn, after a few years' sojourn in this country, to spend the rest of their days in "la bell' Italia." Rarely, if ever, are they weaned from their old love.

III. Italians in the United States

It is a very difficult matter to compute the number of Italians who come to the United States. There is an incessant coming and going, but a recent official item from Rome estimates that fully 3,000,000 are still in the United States, and possibly 600,000 are in Greater New York. The rest are distributed throughout the New England States, Pennsylvania, New York, Maryland, Delaware, New Jersey, and California, though it would be hard to find a State in the Union where the ubiquitous Italian cannot be found. Like his Irish prototype of years ago, whose place he has in a large measure taken, he is everywhere. As market-gardener and farmer he is making vast strides in the central States, and future years will see greater developments than ever in this direction.

IV. Sobriety

The moral, social, and religious condition of the Italians in this country is an interest-

ing study. In this brief outline there is not space enough to enter into detail. But, in general, we may unhesitatingly declare that the social life is exceptionally good, at least, when the immigrant arrives in this country. His sobriety is worthy of note. The *Strassburger Post* has recently devoted space to a comparative statistical study of the amount of liquor consumed by the inhabitants of various European states. The Dane leads the continent, his average being 104 quarts of beer, very little wine, but 24 quarts of brandy each year. The Italian, on the other hand, is the most temperate: he drinks the least beer, a mere two quarts, and the least alcohol, one and a quarter quarts. His wine consumption is 98 quarts. *No nation in the world has such a record for temperate drinking.* Time and again, during our six years' residence in Italy we remarked on the decent aspect of the Italian laboring man on holidays. It is a delight to see him coming home after a day's outing, with his wife and family,—a jolly, laughing, good-natured, sober crowd,—a striking contrast to his American compeer. In the United States, wine is expensive, and he resorts to beer and whisky. It is sad to note that Italians are developing a taste for strong drink. He drinks beer because he sees his American

fellow workingman doing the same. He is very impressionable, and becomes a part of all he meets. He comes in contact with the poorer class of Americans, and patterns after them. Yet withal, his record for sobriety is noteworthy, even in America.

V. Poverty

The Italian is industrious. It is a very rare thing to see an Italian pauper in America; they are too busy to beg. Those who have been in Italy know that one of the blights on that fair land is the trail of the professional beggar. He is a common nuisance, and tries sorely the patience of the tourist by his persistency. The American sculptor, Story, tells of Beppo, the king of the beggars in Rome, who became a very rich man. The very genius of the Roman religion encourages begging. Believing in salvation through works, and that he who "giveth to the poor lendeth to the Lord," and heaps up merit to himself, the Italian is sharp enough to see that there is a decided business advantage in making his appeal for charity in order to help to save the soul of the charitably disposed; hence the beggar is much in evidence to assist men and women to protect their souls. But this type of Italian is not in evidence in America, thus prov-

ing that this undesirable class does not and cannot emigrate. Jacob Riis is authority for the declaration that among the street beggars of New York City, the Irish leads with 15 per cent., the native Americans follow with 12, the Germans with 8, while the Italian shows but 2 per cent. We are told further that "in the almshouses of New York the Italian occupies the enviable position of having the smallest representation, Ireland having 1,617 persons and Italy but 19, while the figures for the entire United States are equally favorable." When it is remembered that the Italian population of the metropolis is more than double that of the Irish, the figures are striking. Perhaps I ought to say that this comparison is made not for the purpose of reflecting on the Irishman, who has made his record, but for the purpose of placing the Italian in the right light.

VI. Crime

1. *Jealous Guarding of Home Life.* The home life of the Italian is jealously guarded, and no nation has a higher record of social virtue. Their chief crimes are the result of jealousy,—a fear that their home life has been invaded. After all, it is a proof of the intense love which dominates their lives, for jealousy, at the last analysis, is in-

tensified love, or love gone mad. Their criminal record is not so bad as it appears. The newspapers seem to take particular delight in exploiting their deeds, yet Dr. S. J. Barrows, the expert criminologist states: "There are vile men in every nationality, and it does not appear by any substantial evidence that the Italian race is peculiarly burdened, though it has been unwarrantably reproached through ignorance." In August, 1911, in Wilmington, Delaware, with a total population of 77,000, there were 350 of all nationalities who had been sentenced to the workhouse, and yet with an Italian colony of 6,000, only 12 were inmates of that institution, whereas their proportionate number on the basis of their population would be 27. This is no exception to the rule. The Black Hand gang and the blackmail scares have created a prejudice in the minds of Americans who have not studied the actual relation of things.

2. *Statistics Not a Fair Index.* Professor E. A. Steiner, known as the immigrant's friend, makes the significant statement which follows, based upon his wide experience: "I have visited nearly all the penitentiaries in the eastern and western States; not to ask how many foreigners there are in jail, but to ask why and how they were convicted, what their present behavior

is; to look the men and women squarely in the face and to converse with them. Let me say here again, emphatically, that the statistics are misleading, and that in spite of the large number of Italians in prison, there are by far *fewer* criminals among them than the statistics *indicate*. In a large number of cases, the crimes for which the Italian suffers, have grown out of local usage in his old home. None the less are they justly punished here, lest they be permitted to perpetuate themselves in the new home. Most of the Italians in prison have used the stiletto and the pistol too freely, just as they used them at home when jealousy made them mad, or when they were in pursuit of vengeance for real or fancied wrongs. There are not a few real criminals who have used the weapon for gain, but in the majority of cases the stabbing or shooting was an affair of honor with those concerned, and even the aggrieved parties preferred to suffer in silence and die, bequeathing their grudge to the next generation, rather than bring the affair before a sordid court. Testimony in such cases is very hard to get, and I have seen many a wounded Italian bite his lips, inwardly groaning, and suffering in silence, unwilling to let strange ears hear the proud secret of which he was the

keeper and the victim. Italian burglars have not reached proficiency enough to have a place in the 'Hall of Infamy,' and bank robbers and 'hold-up' men need not yet fear serious competition from that source. The prisons contain many Italians who transgressed out of ignorance as well as from passion; numbers suffer because they do not know the language of the court, and did not have enough 'coin of the realm'."

3. *Laxity of City Officials.* An unfortunate reason for the apparent prevalence of crime is too often found in the laxity of the city officials. So long as the Italian kills his own kind, the American representatives of justice take little time and trouble to sift out the crimes, and accordingly many go off scot free, and crime is thus encouraged. Not so when he kills an American: then he is hunted to the death and glaring headlines tell of the awful crime.

4. *Inherited Hatred of Governmental Restriction.* The Italian has an inherited hatred of all governmental restriction. For generations he has been the slave of the conquering nations which in turn dominated his fair peninsula, and he has ever been a rebel. This explains his attitude to all authority, and accounts somewhat for his criminal record. Lillian Betts, herself a Roman Catholic, blames the ignorance and bigotry of the im-

migrant priests who have set themselves against American influence, and knowing, as she does, these Italians both sympathetically and critically, her words have considerable weight. She says: "In New York, the streets the Italians live in are the most neglected, the able head of this department claiming that cleanliness is impossible where the Italian lives. The truth is that preparation for cleanliness in our foreign colonies is wholly inadequate. The police despise the Italian except for his voting power. He feels the contempt, but with the wisdom of his race he keeps his crimes foreign, and defies this department more successfully than the public generally knows. He is a peaceable citizen in spite of the peculiar race crimes which startle the public. The criminals are as one to a thousand of these people. On Sundays watch these colonies. The streets are literally crowded from house-line to house-line, as far as the eye can see, but not a policeman in sight, nor occasion for one. Laughter, song, discussion, exchange of epithet, but no disturbance. They mind their own business as no other nation, and carry it to the point of crime when they protect their own criminal. Like every other human being in God's beautiful world, they

have the vices of their virtues. It is for us to learn the last to prevent the first."

VII. Occupations

The Italian in this country belongs to the laboring class, and chiefly to unskilled labor. Nevertheless, he is moving up, and in New York alone, there are fifteen hundred or more lawyers, five hundred physicians, besides a growing number of merchants, bankers, and business men. The young Italians are flocking to our higher schools of learning, and are making an enviable record. Last spring (1911) a new system was established in Columbia University, of graduation with honor. The first and only man to graduate under the new rule was an Italian. He stood an oral examination before the professors of the various departments, in which he took honors. Yet with all these good indications, there is no use disguising the fact that the crowded condition of our little Italies is a menace to our nation. Sociologists have done a great deal to ameliorate the awful conditions which obtain, but much more will have to be done to avert a dire calamity. Socialism of a revolutionary type—suggestive of violence, and something more than a suggestion—is rampant among the Italians. It is an inheritance from the

homeland. The spirit of discontent, nurtured by the unfortunate economic conditions there, has a freer scope in this land of liberty, and unless some high moral and religious restraint is brought to bear upon it, the results may be disastrous both for the Italians and for this country.

A great many have the impression that the Italians who come to this country are chiefly of the riffraff element, but this is very far from the truth. They are the brawn and muscle and undeveloped brain of Italy. The proof of the first is seen in the mass of unskilled labor which lays our suburban tracks, digs our ditches, tunnels our subways, and builds our railroads. What would we do without them? The proof of the second is seen in the wonderful progress they make in our public schools. The invariable testimony of teachers is to the alertness of mind of children of the first generation. I remember visiting an Italian Sunday-school in New York City a short time ago. The Secretary, a young lady, was born in Southern Italy. I thought she was an American, she had so absorbed her environment. In conversation with her I found that she was studying typewriting and stenography, that she had made good progress, and I have since learned that she occupies a very responsible position in the city. She was

the daughter of a New York City street-sweeper and her parents could neither read nor write. America had produced that change in a life by the larger opportunity, and all in the first generation. In a certain city of the East, settlement work was taken up by a Christian church. Italian boys of the immigrant class frequented the settlement. One of the boys is now judge of a juvenile court, another is an instructor of Italian and Latin in one of the well-known universities, another is a successful physician, while still another is a lawyer of prominence and a graduate of Harvard. In commercial life they are forging their way to the front, and in the professions they have already won their place, thus demonstrating their virile qualities. The story of the decadence of the Italian people is the story of the rise of the papacy, and with it the suppression of free thought.

VIII. Italian Renaissance

In the eleventh century Sicily was the center of culture and refinement, then came the fall of Constantinople and the subsequent development of the so-called Holy Roman Empire with its domineering hierarchy. All tendencies to mental and religious liberty

were checked with an iron hand, and though there were many who resisted even to death the encroachments of a tyrannical ecclesiasticism, little by little the papal Church throttled free speech and free thinking, and developed in its own territory a nation of ignoramuses, until in 1870, when the record of illiteracy was fully eighty-five per cent. The Italian Renaissance saved Europe, but Italy itself was cursed by the dominance of a medieval priestcraft and remained in abject poverty and despair. Symonds has well said: "The history of the Italian Renaissance is not the history of arts, or of sciences, or of literature, or even of nations. It is the history of the attainment of self-conscious freedom by the human spirit manifested in the European races." The three R's of the Middle Ages were *Renaissance*,—the new birth, the era of Medicean influence and Florentine elegance; *Reformation*,—the struggle of Luther and Zwingli against scholasticism and papal supremacy; *Revolution*,—the culmination of the irresistible forces of Renaissance and Reformation in the European life and thought. Italian Renaissance, Lutheran Reformation, and French Revolution, form the trinity of influences begun through a domineering yet decadent ecclesiasticism.

The Italian of the twentieth century—the immigrant to the new world—is the product of an effete hierarchy. A child of the country which saved Europe and then the world, he himself remained a victim of a world-bound papacy, and as he touches our American environment so many are ready to declare him a degenerate son of a degenerate people, but the thoughtful observer will look into the philosophy of history and draw a conclusion juster and truer, namely: that the modern Italian is the undeveloped product of a degenerate Church. Breaking away from the traditions of the past, this same Italian breathes the free air of a Protestant environment in the new world, and rises to his old-time power and influence.

IX. Religious Work

Something must be done to meet the immediate needs of the Italian immigrant. American Protestants for a long time did nothing, believing that every Italian was a Roman Catholic, but after careful investigation it was found that a vast number had no affiliation with the mother Church except by tradition and baptism, and that if nothing was done for them by Protestantism, they would come under no religious influence whatsoever.

The socialistic element of Southern Italy is decidedly anticlerical. It knew nothing but the Roman type of Christianity, and the revolt from that was spontaneous and positive; hence it became antichristian. It was the swinging of the pendulum. Contact with American life has brought larger views on religious thought, and these erstwhile antichristian Italians cannot resist the force of Protestant ideas. Protestantism has made its greatest inroads in the socialist camp, and thousands are now rejoicing in the light of the gospel of Christ, who, without such influences, would have been completely separated from the Christian Church.

We have no quarrel with the Roman Church: we are simply trying to reach the vast majority of Italians who for one reason or another have lost faith in her. This is not the place to discuss the reasons for this lack of faith: the fact is undeniable. Apart from the socialistic element, which is aggressively antichristian, the greater number of Italians in this country are absolutely indifferent regarding Christian faith and life. The almost tragic relation of the state to the Church is lamentable. The fiftieth anniversary of the unity of Italy was celebrated in 1911 with great pomp in Rome and Turin, but not a prayer was publicly

offered up for the blessing of the God of nations. This total disregard of Christian teaching augurs ill for a people who in their natural tendencies are religious. The emotional dominates their lives, and yet the cold, bare facts reveal a complete absence of interest in everything which is Christian.

The Italians in America, under the present environment, are fast becoming an ungodly people, and this is our danger and theirs. The various denominations are active in establishing churches in their midst, and the response they have received indicates that these happy-hearted children of Italy are not impervious to the teachings of Christ.

X. Social Opportunity

Evening classes in English and instruction in United States Government, together with the presentation of the New Testament type of Christianity, can be made splendid channels of propaganda among the Italian immigrants. Naturally, they are suspicious of unselfish effort in their religious behalf; they have been so used to ulterior motives that they stand on guard, but as they begin to see the disinterested spirit which prompts evangelical Christians to point them to the Lamb who taketh away the sin of the

world, their hearts become responsive to the truth, and their simple, childlike, yet withal, strong and stalwart natures, assert themselves and prove the power of their intellect and the warmth of their hearts.

Americans must break away from the silly prejudices of the past and that unreasoning ignorance which destroys Christian bonds and creates a chasm between races. By a mutual sympathy and Christlike spirit, we, as Protestant Christians can do mighty things for these lovable people, whose forbears, long years ago, gave our fathers the gospel, and who now themselves need the same old gospel of mercy, compassion, and love.

Italy has played her part well in the history of the world. Notwithstanding all the suppression of free thought, she has produced some of the greatest representatives in literature, science, art, and religion. Dante, Petrarch, and Tasso sing as sweetly as any poets. She has produced a Mondino, the father of modern anatomy, a Falloppio who preceded Harvey. Galileo studied the heavens and turned astrology into astronomy. The barometer, the timepiece, the improvement of the mariners' compass are the gifts of Italian genius. Galvani gave us the first principles of electrical science, fol-

lowed by Volta and Meucci with the telegraph and telephone, while Marconi crowned the whole with his wireless messages. Michel Angelo, Raphael, Andrea del Sarto, Perugino, Carlo Dolce, Giulio Romano, Da Vinci, Titian, and Fra Angelico peopled the galleries of the world with matchless art. Bellini, Verdi, and Donazetti discoursed to us sweet music, while Paganini and his associates reproduced in instrument and song the masters of Italian symphony. Her roll of statesmen and generals is no mean record. From Julius Cæsar down to Garibaldi and Napoleon Bonaparte she has shown masterful generalship, and from Lorenzo to Cavour she has produced men of state and giant nation-builders. In the religious world she has developed her resourceful and intrepid missionaries who went forward and won our Anglo-Saxon fathers to the Christian faith, and even Ireland pays its tribute to Italian evangelism in the person of her patron saint Patrick, himself the son of Italian parents, who was Christian without being Romanist and Catholic without being Protestant, and who in his "Confessions" insists on justification by faith only.

This is the story of Italy. What a debt we owe her! As her sons and daughters of

yeoman blood, illiterate yet virile, undeveloped yet brainy, crowd upon our shores, let us give them our heartiest greetings and an unstinted welcome, and by the grace of God they will do for our America what they have done for their glorious Italy.

